

WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?

Part I

[Note: Due to the sheer enormity of this topic, we'll explore these ideas over the course of more than one hefty commentary.]

PREFACE

Shortly before his deadly rampage in Norway on July 22nd, Anders Behring Breivik posted a 1,516-page farewell message on his Facebook page. Among other things, the document contained a rambling manifesto by a Christian jihadist, who envisioned the emergence of a secret society akin to the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar was an elite corps of Christian warriors during the bloody crusades of the Middle Ages, who once wielded formative political and economic influence in Europe.

In a world where radical religious extremism can manifest itself in acts of terror in one of the most peaceful places on earth, such grossly distorted views of some form of Christian fundamentalism now appears to be a part of the mix, knowing no bounds.

No wonder then that within days, a self-professed Christian fundamentalist, named Chuck Missler, would disavow on his online Bible Prophecy blog any resemblance to the actions of a deranged mass murderer. "The Norway shooter is no fundamentalist Christian," argued Missler. Why? Because, Missler wrote, in that same manifesto the madman "supports Darwinism and human logic, demonstrating a rationalist worldview rather than a Christian one." Uh-oh.

Like these two characters, I would also identify myself as some *kind* of "Christian." But at the same time, I couldn't resemble either of them less. So what kinds of beliefs and behaviors do I accept and refute to describe my own "Christian" identity?

I. WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

Wrestling with this question is more than just a mental exercise, distinguishing ourselves from those others we might perceive as religious

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So, why is it important to ask what "kind" of a Christian we are? Simply put, how we identify ourselves shapes who we are, and shapes our sense of reality, what is real, what is of value and ultimate importance.

If I ask who you really are, you might begin by talking about the roles you've assumed in life: spouse, parent, your occupation, your interests, your family background, etc. Then it might extend to your affiliations: where you live, who you know, who knows you, and how you fit into the mix.

Then – if you're secure enough with your own convictions and think it's safe and appropriate for you to do so -- you might venture into sharing your political persuasion and opinion about the world we live in, and maybe even a few of your religious beliefs. Proper identification is important. It provides a framework for how we understand how we engage the world we live in.

Now, while there are many components to what makes me who I am, I'm keenly aware there are two pervasive ones that seem to speak to the question why it matters to ask what *kind* of Christian I am. The relationship between these two aspects of my identity is both informative and telling. It's about my

religious identity as a Christian of some kind, and what is nowadays touted by the term American “exceptionalism.”

II. CHRISTIANITY TODAY AND AMERICAN “EXCEPTIONALISM”

I’m a Christian, and I’m an American. I fly the American flag outside my front door on national holidays, pay my taxes, and follow our political process. And, I study the Bible because it contains Christianity’s sacred texts; which help me shape the way I try to live my life.

But I have lived most of my adult life with a discernible tension between these two aspects of who I am as an American Christian. Each informs the other. As a Christian, how I understand and practice the way I live out my religious faith challenges my citizenship in the larger world, and vice versa. I cannot isolate my religious life from the rest of my life. If I could, it would be of no earthly use to me.

I live in a time when some of the predominant American cultural attitudes and collective social and political policies seem to stand more than ever in sharp contrast to a biblical view of life; especially the central message of the gospels, derived from the wisdom teachings of Jesus, and a biblical vision of how we might one day achieve a just and peaceful world.

While this is an assertion from my own perspective that should hardly require debate or further inquiry as far as I’m concerned, I am equally aware there are a number of other Americans who also consider themselves to be Christians, who would not see things the way I do. So I offer just a few examples, without necessarily feeling the need to argue or defend my viewpoint further.

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For one thing, we remain indisputably the one dominant imperial power in the world today; with a military force that dwarfs the collective military might of all other nations of the world combined. We wage wars we cannot win, in order to suppress the violence of extremists we cannot win over; with a ready willingness to inflict collateral damage on the civilian populations of other countries in our own self-interest.

Sometimes we do so in the name of liberation; but our attempts to secure for other nations such an exodus from tyranny bears little resemblance to the “crooked ways made straight” in the wilderness the ancient prophets envisioned. Our wars drag on so long now they have become a habituated routine; often reported only in terms of the public’s weariness and fatigue over hearing about them and paying for them.

The Bible is certainly full of similar examples of human conflict. But to put it bluntly, then as now, nothing could be more antithetical to either the Old Testament prophet’s visions, or the message in those gospel parables Jesus sketches for us about another kingdom that isn’t that far off, if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear. It’s about a different kind of world God envisions; where swords are beaten into plowshares, we study war no more, and those who make for peace without sword in hand are esteemed as the most blessed, and worthy to be called God’s children.

Here at home, as a society we also either tolerate or perpetuate the widening gulf of disparity between the top 2% in our society who luxuriate in excessive wealth, at the expense of the vanishing middle class who have steadily descended into the swelling ranks of our nation’s poor. Increasingly for the overwhelming majority of inhabitants in our land, the odds of getting ahead, rather than falling further behind in what we’ve always boasted to be the “land of opportunity,” have become about as good as winning the lottery.

But the mere suggestion of further taxing the excessively affluent among us always

precipitates this sober threat to our tenuous economic recovery; that those who might create lower wage jobs for the growing ranks of the unemployed might be otherwise “dis-incentivized” to do so if they have to pay a dime more in taxes.

Again, nothing could be more antithetical to the gospel message of the kind of world God envisions; where everyone would dwell in the shade of their own fig tree (that is, everyone would simply have *enough*), with a divine economy which realigns itself with the wise stewardship of creation, as the injustices of gross inequity are redressed, the weak and poor are lifted up, and the haughty and mighty brought low.

If a historical perspective is any guide, we all know that great empires rise and fall on their own, under the weight of their own hubris. As such, American “exceptionalism” appears to be not just a matter of our striving for greatness in our efforts to “form a more perfect union,” but the twin risks of blinding arrogance and willful avarice; that is, if we misuse the undeniable capacity our nation has with its unilateral power and domination to shape the planet’s future. How shall we then act?

Asking an honest question about what makes America *exceptional*, is not unlike asking what makes Christianity *of any kind* unique or special. Just as true patriotism is not defined by “loving America, right or wrong,” so too simply accepting a populist view of what passes for much of modern Christianity appears to have become an unfortunate and misguided appropriation of the biblical vision and early tradition of a richly transformative and empowering faith. American “exceptionalism” runs the same risk as a kind of Christian religiosity that has hijacked and distorted a different kind of Christianity that – I would argue – is more authentic and biblically based.

To summarize up to this point, as a nation that still overwhelmingly identifies itself as Christian, it is difficult to read and reflect on, say, the Pentateuch or prophetic tradition found in the Jewish scriptures (my Old

Testament), or the “kingdom” parables with which Jesus describes God’s vision for the world, without coming to the unavoidable conclusion that we have still missed the mark by a mile.

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The same tension is felt even more strongly within the broad diversity of those 80% of all (surveyed) Americans who all claim the same basic religious identity I do as being a “Christian.”

So, when I read where the Texas governor’s response to the devastation in his state caused by the worst drought in modern history was to use his vested authority to declare “Three Days of Prayer for Rain,” it causes me to wonder exactly what kind of influence he thinks his heavenly Father has over Mother Nature?

Or, when I hear another political candidate on the campaign trail first share her transformative experience of being “born again” in Christ, and then proceed to rail against the alien and the stranger in our midst, or castigate our gay brothers and sisters as “evil” and “pitiful,” I fail to see how she has been changed for the better; or anything resembling the likeness of her Lord, who identified himself with such outcasts.

When I see grinning televangelists still peddling a “prosperity gospel” about personal self-actualization that’s measured by material excess, or a “fire and brimstone” apocalyptic preacher foretelling of the world’s imminent demise so you needn’t worry about trying to redeem the Creation entrusted to us, but rather just look out for your own personal salvation, it’s no wonder popular Christianity is regarded by its skeptics, critics and disillusioned former believers as nothing more than the elixir of slick-tongued charlatans and misguided buffoons.

I myself shake my head and wonder where, in heaven's name, do they come up with this stuff? On the one hand, I want to believe one's religious convictions are the most powerful and persuasive things which guides and informs how one should live out one's life; that is, until I encounter those who use their own religious beliefs – beliefs that presumably derive from the same source tradition as mine – to end up standing in such sharp juxtaposition to my own religious world view.

Asking what *kind* of Christian I am may not simply be the most important *religious* question to ask; but the most important, all-encompassing question of all. So, how would *you* go about describing kind of Christian *you* are?

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III. "SPEAKING CHRISTIAN"

Speaking Christian is the name of the latest book by the biblical scholar and Christian commentator, Marcus Borg. This easily accessible work almost reads like a little catechism of the progressive movement within contemporary Christianity. Much of what follows is set within the framework of a regurgitation and response to his book, with my own comments and examples.

In his book, Borg suggests Christian language has been usurped and misinterpreted by one predominant view of Christianity today; namely, a two-fold misappropriation of the Bible by a majority of Americans surveyed who claim the Christian scriptures to be both *inerrant*, and to be taken *literally*.

According to this viewpoint, the Bible is not just the *Word* of God, as experienced and expressed in human life and language, but the actual *words* of God, without exception or equivocation. And furthermore, the truths

revealed in scripture are only to be understood as *factually true*.

But that pervasive assumption about what people automatically think of when they hear many of the terms used to describe Christianity, in fact, expresses only one of at least two *different kinds* of Christianity.

The first kind is the more familiar "heaven and hell" form of Christianity that emphasizes believing the right things in order to ensure eternal life for yourself, rather than the alternative negative consequence, eternal damnation.

This includes believing Jesus somehow set things right for us with God by dying for our sins; and obeying a set of rules in this life, in order to inherit our reward in the next. Those rules are understood within the context of a set of scriptures that are not only regarded as sacred and revered; but, again, to be taken literally (factually) and accepted as inerrant.

Perhaps a good example of this kind of Christianity was the story of the transgender resident in San Francisco who went to the California Department of Motor Vehicles earlier this year to change her gender status on her driver's license. The clerk who processed the request later subsequently took it upon himself to send her a personal letter, allegedly warning her that her sex change was a "very evil decision," and that "the homosexual act is an abomination that leads to hell."

The woman sued, the clerk subsequently resigned and the government awarded the plaintiff \$-thousands in compensatory damages.

But in the end – and here's the more important point -- no hearts or minds were converted or transformed as a result of the actions of this kind of Christian's beliefs or actions. Whether anyone in this sad tale ends up in some future hell remains to be seen. But everyone may have gotten a foretaste of it already in this story.

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In fact, within the context of this kind of Christianity has developed an often historically recent and rather peculiar understanding for much of the language with which Christians speak about their faith.

This is contrasted with the second general understanding of Christian identity with the Bible that Borg (among others) calls a “historical-metaphorical” approach; where biblical stories are not only understood within the context of the lives of the people experiencing them in a particular culture and community’s time and place; but also conveyed with a language in which universal, divine truths are conveyed that run far deeper than mere transitory facts that only skim the surface.

I’ve always referred to it as the *mytho-poetic* power of biblical language as something universal and timeless. Take, for example, Jesus’ agrarian parables from the ancient world that are clearly to be taken symbolically, and understood figuratively, as relevant and applicable messages for our own very different time.

Here are some examples of how the same religious terms are used to express these two different kinds of Christianity. First, take the term “salvation,” what it means to be “saved,” by a “savior.”

In a heaven-and-hell kind of Christianity, *salvation* is about being forgiven for personal sins and being *saved* for a place in an afterlife. Even more so, not only is heaven a place reserved exclusively for those who claim to be a Christian; but for the right kind of Christian who has accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and *savior* as well; following a certain prescribed formula or set of beliefs.

This typically includes the belief that God once loved us so much that *He* (God is always referred to in anthropomorphic terms and male) somehow persuaded the imperial authorities of Rome and the ecclesiastical authorities of Jerusalem to execute in the most hideous way his “only begotten Son” as a political insurrectionist and religious rabble-rouser; in order to not only somehow make up for my personal sinfulness, but also then perform a death-defying feat by resuscitating a corpse, so it could then ascend to a place from which he will one day return, after a “rapture” (a strange 19th century invention, in and of itself) and retrieve the select few (namely, the true believers). Whew!

But in the Bible, *salvation* seldom refers to an afterlife. The ancient Israelites did not concern themselves with it. For them, salvation was instead about *liberation*, as experienced in the story of their exodus from domination and bondage in Egypt. This included the economic bondage of slavery, the political bondage of powerlessness, and religious bondage, where they were forced to worship Pharaoh as divine, instead of their God.

As such, salvation essentially had nothing to do with another world, another time, another place. Instead, salvation in the Bible was a story about transformation; about being brought into a new way of living, here and now, with the assurance of God’s abiding presence.

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This is what makes what would otherwise appear to be a desert wasteland instead be a place flowing with “milk and honey.” Once “saved” (that is liberated and delivered), it may outwardly be the same place, but there’s a whole different way of being – and relating – in that time and place.

Similarly, in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel, salvation was again understood as the *return* from exile; following their captivity in Babylon, and the restoration of life again in their homeland. And finally, in the psalmist tradition especially, salvation was experienced as *rescue* from peril; sometimes it was individual peril, but primarily collective, communal peril.

However, as Borg emphasizes, “salvation is about more than deliverance and rescue: to be saved was to enter into a new kind of life, a covenanted life with God. Salvation is about both deliverance and transformation.”

In the New Testament’s canonical gospels, this kind of tangible transformation is expressed with such stories as the blind receiving their sight, the dead being raised, the sick being restored to health, and the fearful learning to trust again; and all in a new way. The greater miracle in each case was not some inexplicable reversal of some natural affliction; but the transformative consequence of the experience.

In this sense, salvation in the Bible may be personal; but it is about more than just transformation of the individual. It is also corporate and “political,” in the broadest sense of that term. It has to do with how we live together, and how the world we live in might be transformed.

For example, where economic inequity was rampant and extreme, the Israelites were liberated from bondage under Pharaoh, only to eventually suffer economic oppression under their own ruling elite. The radical economic laws found in the Torah emerged to become part of their sacred texts; in order to combat such inequities that had resurfaced.

Among these “sacred” laws: no interest was to be charged on loans, all debts were forgiven every seven years, those debtors who had become indentured slaves were freed, and every fifty years all land was returned to the original owners without compensation.

One might ask how the recent debt ceiling debate, the battles of further regulating the banking and credit card industries, or the mortgage foreclosure debacle would play out in such a scenario? Or, how many Bible-thumping politicians today would embrace such economic policies to save us from the economic mess we’re in? Were things all that different back then?

The first century world in which Jesus lived was one of stark economic hardship as well. He lived and died amongst a peasant class that knew nothing but subsistence living under the imperial domination of Rome through violence, and a *kind* of Judaism he himself evidently experienced that was more concerned with believing the right things, than doing good (e.g. the story of the Good Samaritan).

And Jesus’ teachings, his healing miracles and most his especially his pithy sayings and earthy parables could be summed up within this general framework. If Jesus *was* a savior, perhaps it was this from just these *kinds* of power, politics, economics and religion that he came to save us.

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Now, something that is common to *all kinds* of Christians is the affirmation that Jesus is (to use Borg’s language) the “decisive revelation of the character and passion of God.”

What *that* means, however, differs depending on what kind of Christian you might consider yourself to be; starting with whether or not Jesus, as the decisive revelation for *me*, means he’s the *only* way to go.

Contrary to another kind of Christian, I am the kind of Christian who’d say Jesus’ *way* may be the only way to God, but Jesus is not necessarily the only way. For one thing, Jesus himself never made any such an exclusive

claim. Rather, Jesus' way of living and what he taught were revelatory of God's ways.

Further, the Jesus I have come to know is one who stands on one particular pathway among several equally valid ones; and beckons "follow me, come and see" as an invitation, not a command or ultimatum. I've followed this one particular path long enough now that I find little reason to turn back; and every reason to continue this journey, because I continue to encounter something of the divine in new and transforming ways around every corner.

Now, at the risk of stereotypical oversimplification, there are generally two different and divergent paths one can take from this point of departure, to further explore what kind of Christian you might be. Here are some examples:

+ Down one path is the belief that God is humanlike, and typically male; who lives in heaven, where we might one day take up residence ourselves.

Or down another path, God is a persistent, pervading presence that is in all things and above all things, including our *incapacity* to relegate or domesticate the divine to any one place, time or entity.

+ Down one path is a God that is more *punitive*, threatening eternal damnation for those who sin and stray from God's rules; the interpretation and selective application of which has changed over time.

Down the other path is a God who is more *passionate* about this world as it still might be.

+ Down one path, our relationship with God is more about sin and *conditional* forgiveness, so we can be saved (for eternal life).

Or down another path, our relationship with God is more about *unconditional* forgiveness (or it isn't grace), reconciliation and transformation of the life we're already living.

Down the first path, the "kingdom of heaven" is about another time and place; down the

second path, the kingdom is forever "at hand," in the transforming experience of a heaven on earth and eternal life already begun.

+ Down one path, the historical Jesus is really God, who's merely disguised as a human, and therefore sinless and perfect.

Down the other, the Jesus of history was as human as the rest of us. Speaking of "exceptionalism," he was truly an exceptional human being, who lived and died like everyone else.

+ Down one path of Christianity, the pre-Easter Jesus was born primarily so he could die for us.

Down the other way, the pre-Easter Jesus was a spirit sage who taught amongst his kinfolk, healed those in need with unfettered compassion, defied all earthly authority -- including the stultified religious hierarchy of his own Jewish faith -- and was obsessed with what the world would be like if God was in charge, and the domination system that oppressed us was not.

+ Down one path, the post-Easter Jesus is the flesh-and-blood Jesus brought back to mortal life, to assuage our fear of death with the idea that we, like him, can escape it in the end.

Down the other path, there is more of a suspension of belief about those things no one can know; as the post-Easter Jesus simultaneously appears and disappears, walks through locked doors and dines with the downhearted, before setting the scriptures ablaze in their hearts, and vanishing when he breaks bread with them. Down this other path, the post-Easter Jesus offers so much more, that resurrection becomes more than mere resuscitation; in the transformative experiences of those early followers.

With what were they left? When Jesus "ascended," and the Spirit "descended" with tongues of fire and endowed them with words to speak, what became of this new language they were given to describe what would become the newborn faith we call Christianity? Like

Christianity itself, our language to describe it has obviously taken divergent paths.
+ Down one path, Christianity is more often viewed as *believing* a set of statements about God, Jesus, life and death; like a creed or set of doctrines or laundry list of “family values” that developed, changed and adapted over time to try to define and delineate what came to be considered “orthodox” (meaning accepted right thinking).

However, as Borg points out, the term as it was used in the English language prior to the 17th century, was not so much a matter of believing *that* something was true, but rather believing *in* something or someone. The word came from the Old English *be loef*, which meant “to hold dear.” In this sense, *believing* was more a matter of *beloving*.

Thus, when Jesus recites the great commandment (as passed down to him in his own religious tradition), it was a matter of *loving* God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It wasn’t about believing whether a set of statements about God were true or not. As Borg puts it, “*Believing* that a set of statements are true has little transforming power. But *beloving* God as shown in Jesus has great transforming power.”

+ Nowadays, people often use the terms *belief* and *faith* as if they are the same thing. They are not. But like belief, faith also means something different depending on which kind of Christianity you’re talking about.

From the Latin (and Greek equivalent), *fiducia* means “trust.” It speaks to our allegiance, loyalty, commitment and attentiveness to our *relationship with God*, not a set of immutable “right” beliefs *about* God. The latter places a condition on faithfulness that if one falls short and misses the mark, the consequence is anxiety, fear and mistrust. Then all the worry about a final judgment when we end up counted among the goats instead of the sheep is right around the corner.

Instead, down a road apparently less travelled is that more ancient notion of faith, once

described by the 19th century theologian and philosopher Soren Keirkegaard as the “buoyancy of God.” In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus walks on water. When Peter tries it, he begins to sink like a stone with fear, until the buoyancy of faith once again keeps him afloat. Such a leap of faith, as trust, has nothing to do with whether Peter himself is good enough to make the swim team.

There is also that component to faith, as *loyalty* and *allegiance*, that has a corporate, even political, meaning. To place one’s *ultimate* faith in God means *not* placing one’s ultimate trust in anything, or anyone else. Remember, lordship is not relegated exclusively to religion; and one can make a religion out of anything. In whom, or what, do you ultimately place your trust, as if your life depended on it?

+ The most common meaning of the terms *mercy* and *merciful* in heaven-and-hell Christianity these days usually presupposes a God that spares the rod, even though we deserve his wrath. Sin and forgiveness become a brokered deal, where the question of worthiness and plea for God’s mercy is always a backdrop, requiring doing the right thing to receive a reward.

But the fuller meaning of the biblical word for mercy is often better conveyed with the English word *compassion*. There’s a difference in the way we understand these terms, because they have to do with the way we view the character of God, and our relationship with God and one another.

Compassion (from the Latin) means, “to feel with” the way another feels. The Hebrew word comes from a word that is akin to “womb” or being “womb-like.” As such, compassion does not suggest wrongdoing, where mercy can be a required response. Instead, compassion is about having empathy for another; to the extent one is able and willing to abide and even suffer along with another in an empathic, consoling, nurturing and embracing way. It is about caring for another, and bearing one another’s burdens, joys and sorrows.

Hence, when Jesus enjoins us in one of the beatitudes to “be merciful, as God is merciful,” or, “blessed are the merciful, mercy will be shown them,” it is about something far more than a command to forgive others who have done us wrong. Instead, it is about entering into a compassionate relationship with those in need; just as God shows God’s compassion in God’s entering into relationship with us.

Thus, the beatitude Jesus gives us might best be translated and extrapolated to read, “Blessed are those who are compassionate, for in doing so, they will experience what living in a relationship with what a compassionate (and not just merciful) God is like.”

There are a number of other familiar words used to describe one kind of Christianity or another, and we’ll take up several of them in the next commentary; along with reconsidering a foundational question that may lay at the heart of this entire exploration of these ideas. But for now, let’s take a look at a few more often-heard term, and suggest where we might venture from here.

+ The words *righteous* and *righteousness* can be loaded religious words that often have negative connotations; especially for those who suffer the oppressive piety of those zealous religious types who’re convinced of their own *self-righteousness*.

But in the Bible, *righteousness* is simply understood as “doing what is *right*, for the common good.” Those who are righteous are juxtaposed (as in the Psalms and Proverbs, for example) with “the wicked,” and the harsh reality the biblical narrative acknowledges is that, in fact, the wicked often prosper and the righteous suffer.

But in addition, the other aspect of this word has a communal, even political component to it. In the Bible, it has to do with the way the social order gets put right. In this sense, the two words used almost synonymously in the Bible are *righteousness* and *justice*.

When it came to a matter of the huge inequity between the rich and poor mentioned earlier,

for example, these two words were used interchangeably; as with the familiar lines from the prophet Amos, recently carved in a granite memorial; as it was quoted by another prophet for our time, Martin Luther King, “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

Nowadays, when we think of the word *justice*, we relegate the term to the notion of *retributive* or *punitive* justice. As such, it is about the penalties paid for those who disobey the law.

But the Bible uses the word for something more. Righteousness – that is, doing what is right -- is about *distributive* justice. It is about the fair distribution of something that does not belong to any of us. It is rather how we share the entirety of all there is, which ultimately all belongs to God.

The indictment against injustice is found throughout the biblical narrative. The Old Testament prophets and the figures of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament with their passionate message for this kind of distributive justice (righteousness) were all clearly viewed as a threat by those in positions of economic and political power.

Translation of the text in the Sermon on the Mount is not distorted one whit to substitutes the word *justice* in the familiar line from Matthew, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.” Similarly, the beatitudes can equally read,

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.” *And*, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice’s sake.”

Jesus is talking about distributive justice, what is right and *fair*, as a reflection of the world as God has created it, and Jesus envisions it. Such “fairness” is not about total equity, but sufficiency.

IV. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
SERIOUSLY, WHAT DOES JESUS HAVE TO DO WITH CHRISTIANITY?

In the next commentary, “What Kind of Christian” we’ll look at several more familiar terms associated with how Christians describe their faith with two contrasting understandings, including: sin, repentance and forgiveness.

Inevitably, however, looking at these two different paths I’ve sketched out leads to one over-arching question, namely this: If Jesus, in any understanding of what it means to be a Christian of any kind, is the fullest manifestation of God for us, how does he come to be accorded the title “Christ?”

Or, as it has been similarly phrased, how does the person and character of the Jesus of history become the Christ of faith; and a kind of faith on which you would stake your life and call Christianity?

After all, it’s hard enough to peel back the layers of early Church experiences with their “risen Lord” and try to discern what are most likely the authentic sayings of the historical Jesus; and not just what was later attributed to him in the gospels and beyond.

But how do those who have continued down one of those paths I’ve tried to describe come to understand which kind of Christianity still speaks to our relationship with God in this world? If it were simply a matter of following the most authentic Jesus we can find, wouldn’t we call ourselves a *Jesus-ite*, not a *Christian*?

If it were simply a matter of following the most authentic Jesus we can find, wouldn’t we call ourselves a Jesus-ite, not a Christian?

But again, if we are instead a follower of someone we call Christ, what *kind* of Christianity is that?

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WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN – PART II

PREFACE: WHO'S GOT WHICH JESUS?

*Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life
End over end neither left nor to right
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights
Drop kick me Jesus through the goal posts of life.*

Country western singer, Bobby Bare

St. Xavier High in Cincinnati has a helluva football team, but the all-boys Catholic school is still muzzled by their administration with regard to what are permissible cheers from the bleachers during game time. So when rival Colerain high school team broke their winning streak by missing a 45-yard field goal attempt during the last minute of a recent game, and the best thing the losers could do was console themselves chanting, “We got girls!” Xavier fans resorted to the only comeback they had left as the ultimate victor’s cry, “Well, we got Jesus!”

Apparently that was too much for Colerain’s coach, Tom Bolden. He could respect the talents of their star quarterback, the superior skill of their wide receivers, and the solid strength of their defensive linemen. But claiming divine favor? “That’s where I’ve got to draw the line,” Bolden was caught saying on some amateur video. “They ought to be embarrassed.”

Do you ever find yourself wishing you coulda’ been there, to offer a better comeback line? What about, “We got girls, and we got Jesus too!” Even better, I bet the Xavier Bomber’s could have stumped and stupefied Colerain’s Cardinals if they’d fired back a more astute, “And exactly which Jesus have you got?” For truth be told, the Jesus I’ve come to know from the gospel traditions is one that seemed

to find himself on the side of more losers than winners.

In fact, figuring out *which* Jesus is *your* Jesus may be the key to understanding the title you might accord him as *Christ*, and exactly what *kind* of Christian you may be. But first, a look at the context of the question, from both a contemporary and historical point of view.

I. WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN? ORGANIZED OR DISORGANIZED?

More often than not, to hear the public media and secular press tell it, aren’t Christians all alike? They’re typically conservative, fundamentalist/literalist, judgmental, and -- when exposed to the light of day -- hypocritical. Either that, or they’re establishment types, with some nominal affiliation to a dwindling mainline denominational institution; or a relatively small radical fringe that takes the gospel’s social/communal agenda so seriously that it proves itself to be mainstream-averse.

More and more these days, however, the diversity of so-called “designer” religion is observed to be increasingly pervading the spiritual landscape. Newly released research outlined in statistical expert George Barna’s new book *Futurecast*, tracks the rise of both

the “un-churched” and emerging forms of personal religious expression.

“America is headed for 310 million people with 310 million religions,” he says. “We want everything customized to our personal needs -- our clothing, our food, our education. Now it's our religion. People say, 'I believe in God. I believe the Bible is a good book. And then I believe whatever I want.'”

Barna critiques churches still peddling an old familiar message that has gone ‘round in circles for centuries: “Jesus is the answer. Accept him. Say this little Sinners Prayer and keep coming back.’ It doesn't work. People end up bored, burned out and empty,” Barna says. “They look at church and wonder, 'Jesus died for this?’”

Barna's research indicates a downtrend in all areas of religious belief and behavior, except two: More people claim they have accepted Jesus as their savior (whatever that means); and second, more expect to go to heaven (whatever that means).

[Sep 13, 2011 ... By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY]

This suggests a couple things. One is the spiritual questions and yearnings about ultimate value and meaning – along with the mythic, metaphorical and even liturgical ways we find to illumine them – are both *irrepressible and ever changing*.

And secondly, as a result, it does not lend itself well to permanent institutionalization, but is a universal phenomenon forever *in process*. [Pilgrims on a journey, on “pathways” that may lead us from where we are to where we long to be, is a good way to describe it!]

To look at a contemporary counterpart to Barna's latest research in American Christianity, one can look at what's happening in the new emerging world super power,

China; where Christianity is permitted in state-sanctioned churches, and where Catholicism and Protestantism are designated by the state as two separate religions. So, when it comes to designating what *kind* of Christian you might be, in the eyes of the State apparently that suffices!

These churches report to the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and are forbidden to take part in any religious activity outside their places of worship. They adhere to the slogan, "Love the country - love your religion." ... And, in return the Party promotes atheism in schools but undertakes "to protect and respect religion until such time as religion itself will disappear."

Interestingly enough however, these (official numbers of state sanctioned churches) are dwarfed by unofficial "house churches" spreading across the country. Both the state-sanctioned institutionalized form of Christianity and the State itself feel threatened. The official “churches of accommodation” fear the house churches' fervor may provoke a government backlash; because what the authorities consider non-negotiable is the *disorganized* house churches' refusal to acknowledge any official authority over their organization. It leads me to wonder, is it merely some anti-authoritarian sentiment that's going on; or some other intrinsic longing of the human heart? A BBC reporter offers his findings from his recent assignment:

An educated young Christian described her church to me: "We have 50 young professionals in this house church. Everyone is so busy working, you don't have time socializing, and even if you are socializing, you are putting on a fake face. But in house church people feel warm, they feel welcome... they feel people really love them so they really want to join the community, a lot of people come for this."

For these Chinese, in the stampede to get rich, trust in institutions, trust between individuals, trust between the generations, is breaking

down. As one of China's most eminent philosophers of religion - Professor He Guanghu, at Renmin University in Beijing put it to me: "The worship of Mammon... has become many people's life purpose. I think it is very natural that many other people will not be satisfied... will seek some meaning for their lives so that when Christianity falls into their lives, they will seize it very tightly."

[Christians in China: Is the country in spiritual crisis?
by Tim Gardam, BBC Radio 12 September 2011]

These two new studies in the U.S. and China suggest an old story that is still finding new forms of expression; namely, that alternate (disorganized) forms of searching for a way to live more authentic and ultimately meaningful lives is a universal experiential context for any religious tradition. One can look at the two kinds of Christianity evolving or devolving today, organized and "disorganized" or non-institutionalized. More so, one can also see how this has always been the case when it comes to asking what *kind* of Christianity you're talking about. Just go back to the beginning ...

II. THE FIRST CHRISTIANS, THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS AND DIFFERENT "CHRISTS"

As much as it seems we have tried to do sometimes, it's difficult to try to figure out what kind of Christianity we may be talking about, without figuring out which Jesus we're talking about. If Jesus, the Christ (messiah, "anointed one"), is understood in any way to be the ultimate manifestation of God in human experience (that is, *the* "Christ" above all others), then we must start and end with him.

This would be easy, if only there was a single shared experience of who this Jesus "really" was, and still *is* for all those who would claim to follow him, believe in him, ascribe their allegiance to him as Lord and Savior, wisdom teacher and wondrous healer, channel of

restorative and transformative love and grace. Regrettably or not, this is not the case.

Sometimes, when we peel away the layers of tradition found in both the canonical and non-canonical gospel accounts and other early writings of the emerging Christian faith, we find there's little left of what can be ascribed to the historical figure of Jesus as authentic. From there, we can look for some common character traits and how early followers lives were experientially impacted by this spirit sage, otherwise unknown to us.

In this sense, one could say there were Christians before the historical Jesus ever ended up nailed to a cross. Jesus' followers had not only already begun imitating his itinerant ministry of healing and controversial teaching amongst the Galilean peasant class before his ignominious execution; but the intentional efforts to extinguish the flame already set ablaze in their hearts.

For example, take the Jesus character portrayed in the synoptic gospels who asks his closest associates who the crowds think he is, then who they think he is. When Peter gives the correct answer – namely, that he has come to believe Jesus is the Christ -- his "confession" is regarded by most biblical scholars to be a confessional proclamation of the early church.

The message being conveyed is clear. The early years of persecution that followed Jesus' death failed to silence the message of the messianic messenger. Instead, it only spawned a new wave of this radical Jewish sect; where there were soon a variety of early Christian communities telling their own stories of interpretation and application of the immutable, irrepressible presence of a "living Jesus" that remained to be experienced.

What this means, of course, is that there were different *kinds* of Christians from the very

start. The quest and challenge therefore to discern what might be the most authentic Christ for any one community or another would result in a dynamic hodge-podge of groups; eventually distinguished either by their claims of exclusive authority and orthodoxy (“right-thinking”), or the irrepressible spiritual sojourn of the individual believer that eventually subverts such human enterprises.

That is, efforts to homogenize these different kinds of Christian communities followed the natural human inclination to domesticate and demarcate a good thing through institutionalization. Such was the case when the emperor Constantine credited his military victory over his rival Maxentius near Rome’s Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., to Jesus (the) Christ.

He subsequently converted to what had previously been outlawed and persecuted Christianity; in a word chanting, “We’ve got Jesus!” Jesus the Victor not only became the empire’s new religion; but its unifying principle for political stability, as well. One could speculate whether Constantine bowed down before this Jesus, or merely put him in his back pocket?

So it was that in 333 C.E., Constantine ordered the Church’s bishops to meet in Nicea, to iron out their theological differences and expunge any dissonant heresies. There was to be only one *kind* of Christian, as defined by an orthodox creed. Such articles of belief would be sanctioned (and in this sense controlled) by the State.

So pleased was the emperor with the results that, at the conclusion of their meeting, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was treated to an imperial banquet, while armed guards kept the religious riff-raff out behind locked doors.

For a moment, recall how the early gospel traditions had once recorded variations of

Jesus’ portrayals of the imminent banquet of an in-breaking reign of God; where the formal guest list was thrown, the least likely ushered in, and those with highest rank cautioned against assuming seats of honor at the head table.

Indiscriminate bands of Christians had once gathered secretly in homes to share how this Jesus “character” of God – for all intents and purposes, a loser, dead and gone – was still somehow alive for them. It had taken less than three centuries for a disorganized orphan faith to get adopted by the state; and organized to the point of an institution constructing a confessional formula about what to believe about a “personhood” of God, now elevated to co-equal status with the divine.

In some ways, the pendulum that swings between formal and informal, the organized and disorganized, the institutionalized and free-form (otherwise known sometimes as emerging or progressive forms nowadays), has progressed in some ways. Heretics are generally no longer burned at the stake. Even China has discovered it can’t control certain *kinds* of Christianity it doesn’t even want to acknowledge exists.

But, as important as it is to distinguish between the different kinds of Christianity, it seems equally clear there will always be sufficient variety that makes it difficult to lump us all together.

A short while ago, before the latest prediction by some zealous Bible believers the final apocalypse was at hand, and instead the rapture came and went like a giant bubble of hot air, San Francisco Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll wrote,

“We must all remember this as the apocalypse approaches: Not all Christians are evangelicals, and not all evangelicals are nutballs. They do not look to the sky for signs. Believing that this

year's earthquake or tornado or bridge collapse has a specific external God-related meaning is a fringe belief. The fringe is loud; in Republican politics, it could be decisive. But it's the fringe."

Setting aside the partisan jab, the reminder was nonetheless helpful and important. The question remains nonetheless, what *kind* of Christian might you be? Here's a key.

III. WHICH JESUS HAVE YOU GOT? OR, WHICH JESUS HAS GOT YOU?

If Christians nevertheless declare that he (Jesus) was the "anointed one," it is only by redefining the role of the "anointed one" to fit what Jesus actually did. To be authentically Christian is to be Christocentric. That can take many forms, and Christians can argue passionately as to whether the center is the life and teaching of Jesus, the apostolic witness to Jesus, the cross as effecting atonement, the resurrection as demonstrating a unique relation to God, or incarnation as presenting God to us in and through a human being.

Christian faith watered down? John Cobb, Jr.,

Some scholars will talk about the Jesus of history and Christ of faith. Others will distinguish between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. Educated types well versed in biblical studies, as well as everyday folks who just read any one of a number of translations of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts, will read the similarities and differences in the various gospel narratives about the Jesus character portrayed, and take them as literal/historical, or interpret them metaphorically or sacramentally.

Some will interpret the varying accounts of Jesus' itinerant life and brief ministry through the lens of the "priestly" motif of temple sacrifice and atonement (Lamb of God). Others will see the restorative life of Jesus the good shepherd, who gathers the lost, even those beyond the pale; and brings them out of exile, returning home rejoicing. Still others will see in Jesus the transformative exodus of liberation from bondage to freedom, from

death to new life. So, which Jesus have you got?

But in every case, in asking what *kind* of Christian one may be, there's an underlying presupposition and a back-story. And the back-story is the Jesus story. Who do you think Jesus was, what's his story, as near as we can figure it?

When the Jesus portrayed in the various gospels bids every day folk to follow him, who is it that is beckoning them? Beckoning us? And, though I may say I'm a follower of a *certain* Jesus I've come to know as best I can, I am not a *Jesus-ite*. I'm some kind of *Christian*. I have placed my bets on these characters, and have accorded this ancient spirit sage the title Christ. And to him, I have lent my tenuous, curious, questioning, challenging allegiance.

Not only that, but truth be told, I've been at this long enough to acknowledge I used to be *one* kind of Christian, and now I'm quite a different kind. Not only that, considering the path I realize I've been on for some time now, I suspect I'm not done with the *what-kind-of-Christian* question; but instead find myself confronted with a Jesus character that I take to be the face of God, by any other name.

However, I have arrived at a place where it is *insufficient* to simply affirm, "I've got Jesus." Moreover, with the multiplicity of characters out there that are known by the same name, it may no longer be sufficient enough for me to only ask *which* Jesus I've got? Instead, the more telling question for me is which Jesus has got me? Which one grabs hold of me?

Which account of which story most authentically resounds most deeply where, for me, the "heart" of Christianity beats? As Borg once put it in one of his classic writings, "What is the animating source or driving force

of Christianity, without which it would cease to exist?" [The Heart of Christianity, p2]

Here's just one example, with an observation. It is the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan.* [translation follows at the end of the Commentary.]

Scholars generally regard this parable as being as close to the original words of the historical Jesus as you can get; while the setting for the telling of the parable, along with the follow up Q&A session is clearly the work of Luke's early community of believers sharing their own findings to the question everyone in every age ends up asking. What can I do, and how can I be sure I've done enough, to truly live?

Love God, and your neighbor as yourself is the correct formulaic belief. Strange enough, there is less curiosity about who the first object of my affection ought to be, and more about who one might get stuck with as a neighbor.

There's way too much to delve into what is to be found in the story itself, but a few highlights here may suffice to make a point. The institutionalized religion with its ecclesiastical hierarchy has conformity to observe; hence the rigid response to the plight of the one cast off and left for dead along the path from the temple of holiness to nowhere.

Without understanding those limitations, it is subsequently the outcast whose heart is wrenched into action; with unfettered compassion, reckless generosity, self-subjugation to an absolute stranger, and the fool hearty faith that another (the innkeeper) will be as selfless as the Samaritan. The parable is presumably told to answer the question who is one's neighbor? But the original (back story) question has to do with who has discovered the key to living fully.

I recently observed one of those presidential candidate debates on TV, where a question was posed to a Texas congressman who is also a non-practicing physician. By his own admission, however, he made the disclaimer he hadn't practiced medicine for years. After stating his qualified position against government mandates in general, and health care in particular, he was given the hypothetical question what should be done with a young man without health insurance who falls critically ill and needs extensive, costly life-saving medical attention to survive.

When pressed whether the congressman/physician thought the man should be left to fend for himself, over some voices in the audience shouting "Yes!," the candidate expressed his view that "churches, friends and neighbors should step up" like they used to do.

It was one of those moments when I wished I'd been standing in the moderator's shoes, with what to me was the most obvious comeback line, "And who is his neighbor?" For, it's the kind of question that not only asks which Jesus have you got, but which Jesus has got you?

Yesterday, my spouse and I spent a couple hours delivering empty grocery bags to the door steps of seventy of our neighbors, as part of our community's Annual Volunteer Day, and on behalf of the county Food Bank. Next Saturday, we'll pick up whatever food staples have been generously placed in the bags and left by the mailboxes up and down our street. The donated food will go to complete strangers, since I suspect no neighbor of mine that lives on our block has an empty kitchen cupboard. But we all know the need is abundantly out there.

As we made our way up one side of the street, we noticed two women making their

way down the other side. With Bibles and pamphlets in hand were ringing our neighbors doorbells.

Something told me they were Christians; and probably Christians of a different kind. I guessed they might be sharing the happy news they've got Jesus. Not only that, you could get him, as well.

At this point along the way, I'm just hoping Jesus has got me instead.

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The Parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10:25-37]

The Good Samaritan, Vincent van Gogh, 1890

Note: What follows is the Jesus Seminar scholar's color coding as to the likelihood the historical Jesus uttered these words: "Yep, quite likely Jesus" – "Possibly, sure sounds like him" – "Probably subsequently attributed to Jesus in light of the early believers experience" – and, Nope / most likely a later theological development in the gospel tradition.

On one occasion, a legal expert stood up to put him to the test with a question: "Teacher, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "**How do you read what is written in the Law?**"

And he answered, "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your energy, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus said to him, "**You have given the correct answer; do this and you will have life.**"

But with a view of justifying himself, he said to Jesus, "But who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "**There was a man going from Jerusalem to down to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and went off leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road; when he caught sight of him, he went out of his way to avoid him. In the same way, when a Levite came to the place, he took one look at him and crossed the road to avoid him. But this Samaritan who was travelling that way came to where he as and was moved to pity at the sight of him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring olive and wine on them. He hoisted him onto his own animal, brought him to an inn, and looked after him. The next day he took out two silver coins, which he gave to the innkeeper, and said, "Look after him, and on my way back I'll reimburse you for any extra expense you have had. Which of these three, in your opinion, acted like a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"**

He said, "The one who showed him compassion."

Jesus said to him, "**Then go and do the same yourself.**"